

**CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS A PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TOOL IN NIGERIA
(THE NOLLYWOOD OPTION)**

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Abstract

*Studies have shown that Nollywood -the Nigerian film industry, has the capacity to provide a platform for the positive promotion and projection of the values of the Nigerian nation, its culture and people. This has been demonstrated in America and India, respectively, with their film industries (Hollywood and Bollywood) playing complementary roles in shaping their national images than military actions in international leadership. With Nollywood measuring along the same scale, this study on “Cultural communication as a public diplomacy tool (the Nollywood option)” sought to ascertain the extent to which Nollywood films have established their presence outside the shores of Nigeria; how foreign audience perceive Nollywood Films; how Nigerian films have influenced the perception of foreign audience about Nigeria; and what improvement(s) the Nollywood requires towards enhancing its image laundering potential for Nigeria. This study is tied within the framework of the theory of selective processes which demonstrates how individuals may retain or change their opinions in the face of media messages based on three psychological processes of selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention. The study followed a quantitative approach; survey research design, with population of 20 foreign audience that participated in the international conference held at Pan African University, Lagos, with the theme: **Nollywoodin Africa; Africa in Nollywood-** July 2011. Data generated through questionnaire were analyzed using simple percentages. The study found that films can serve as a viable tool for cultural diplomacy that would reward Nigeria with good image and influence internationally. This work among other things recommended that Nigeria must begin to see her films as not just for mere leisure or money making, but also as a powerful tool towards attaining and sustaining positive image. Government should also feel involved in this effort by intervening with a viable policy and legal framework as well as other institutional backings that would make this goal a reality. It is believed that this intellectual exercise would serve as a reliable document for forthcoming researchers in this field of study.*

Key words: Nollywood, Cultural Communication, Public Diplomacy.

Introduction

Public diplomacy has proven to be a valued potent tool in the hands of nations as they attempt to launder their good image against the antagonizing forces of inter-country rivalry that essentially characterizes

international politics. “Broadly speaking”, it means communicating “with foreign publics to establish a dialogue designed to inform and influence” (“Public Diplomacy”, 2011). It differs from the traditional diplomacy in that while the latter involves government communicating with another government, the former involves nation communicating with the public of another nation.

Background of the Study

Cultural diplomacy is an aspect of public diplomacy and involves the employment of cultural elements (such as films, music and other art forms) as a mode of communicating to the public of foreign nations towards inducing in them a positive perception of the country where the communication originates.

According to Ndukwu (2010) “Cultural Diplomacy comprises the exchange of ideas, information, art, lifestyles, value systems, traditions, beliefs and other aspects of culture. Nigerian government should deliberately propound foreign policy decisions on how best to project, promote and protect our National image.”

Cultural diplomacy has assumed so much importance in nation’s effort to project their image that little wonder the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy of the US Department of State (2005) sees cultural diplomacy as “the linchpin of public diplomacy; for it is in cultural activities that a nation’s idea of itself is best represented.”

Among cultural modes that have prominently featured as cultural diplomacy tool of nations is film. Film is seen by public diplomacy advocates as “an enormously important avenue for otherwise diverse cultures to understand each other. It involves the use of truthful propaganda to communicate with citizens in other societies rather than their governments.”

Given the problem of negative image which has caused Nigeria and Nigerians much international embarrassment, film has been identified as a potentially potent weapon at the disposal of the nation in her frantic search for a solution. This is basically for the fact that the Nigerian film industry, now fondly referred to as Nollywood, has within a relatively short period of time become a force to reckon with, globally. According to Uche (2007), since the release of *Living in Bondage* in 1992 by Mr. Kenneth Nnebue, film making in Nigeria has speedily evolved to become a very big industry, churning out hundreds of films yearly, employing thousands and yielding millions annually. In terms of volume of films produced, the Nigerian film industry is only second to Bollywood currently.

Given this success story, many are of the view that time had since been ripe for the nation to employ what she has (film) to achieve what she does not have (image). Concurring with this notion, Ndukwu (2010) argues that Nigerians and Africans are constantly being embarrassed with news about high scale corruption, criminality, kidnapping et cetera, by aggressive and overbearing foreign media agencies. He writes further:

*We must get adjusted to the fact that the world does not view us as we see ourselves. Any time there is an explosion in the Niger Delta, the whole world raise their arms in despair to the extent that the world oil prices shoots up. To an average foreigner, Nigeria is in a state of war and the Niger Delta is being compared to Darfur in Sudan. We can use our films to talk to world citizens and explain the true position of things, even to our fellow Nigerians abroad who are even afraid to come back home to visit or to come and invest in the economy. Through our movies, intending tourist will learn to disregard Travel Advisories pasted in their airports warning them about travelling to Nigeria. The movie **Black Hawk Down** showcases American intervention in Somalia in 1991 and **American Soldiers - One Day in Iraqis** all about the Gulf war from the American point of view and how they want the whole world to view it. We can reach out to world citizens and consciously transmit pictures about the true situation at home. We must use our Movies to explain our big brother roles in Sierra Leone and Liberia through our ECOMOG intervention. Equally, we must*

project our National Tourism potentials and destinations as well as attract foreign direct investments [FDI].

It is against this background that this study intended to explore Nollywood as an agent of cultural diplomacy towards improving the badly battered image of Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

Uche (2007) laments that Nigeria's image abroad is that of corruption, crime, electoral manipulations and abject poverty. Worse still, our movies apparently reinforce this through constantly projecting "rituals and the supernatural which portray us in a bad light." Nigeria, thus argues Ndukwu (2010), needs to re-evaluate her films and check the way she showcases her "value systems" in films, which is necessary for projecting a good national image through cultural diplomacy; this in turn "will eventually enhance our acceptability in the international arena, fast-track our vision and progress as a nation and add immense value to our society." The imperative of the above is further reinforced by the fact that the Western media have dominated the global mainstream communication realm, which for Nigeria and Africa as a whole, results not only in negative portrayal, but also cultural imperialism. "One of the ways to counter Cultural imperialism is through effective, strategic and dedicated Cultural diplomacy" (Ndukwu: 2010).

How "effective, strategic and dedicated" then, has the Nollywood been in advancing Nigeria's image goals in the national scene? This becomes the central question necessitating this research.

Purpose/Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent the Nollywood films have aided Nigeria's image laundering project through serving as a tool for strategic cultural communication. Specifically, the following objectives were aimed at:

- i. To find out the extent to which Nollywood films have established their presence outside the shores of Nigeria.
- ii. To see how positively or negatively foreign audience perceive Nollywood Films.
- iii. To see how positively or negatively Nollywood films have influenced the perception of foreign audience about Nigeria.
- iv. To find out what improvement(s) the Nollywood requires towards enhancing its image laundering potential for Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

This study would be of much significance to the Nigerian nation in her search for a better image, which has seemingly eluded her. Since the nation has been fortunate enough to own a film industry that has apparently shown good promises of reaching the standard of "national cinema brands" represented by the much older Hollywood and Bollywood, it becomes compelling that she starts to build on the success towards a better tomorrow. The data to be generated via the study would thus serve in guiding the industry professionals, regulatory bodies, government and all stakeholders in repositioning the film industry for a more efficient image-building role for Nigeria.

Similarly, communication scholars would find the study beneficial in enriching knowledge and serving as a stepping stone for future studies on the subject treated here.

Research Questions

1. To what extent have Nollywood films established their presence outside the shores of Nigeria?
2. How positively or negatively do foreign audience perceive Nollywood Films?
3. How positively or negatively have Nollywood films influenced the perception of foreign audience about Nigeria?
4. What improvement(s) does the Nollywood require to enhance its image laundering potential for Nigeria?

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

Generally, film as any other media form, has been attributed with the power of influencing perception. This is evident in Ndukwu (2010) and Okoye (1998) in their separate discussions of the possible roles films can play in enhancing the image of Nigeria. However, this power is not without some limitations as imposed by the various intervening variables operating between them and their audiences.

Mbah (2006) in his investigation of how much Nollywood films have influenced the perception of Nigerian undergraduates students about their country discovered that “films have had little or no impact” in this respect since the respondents believed their personal experience to be a more reliable source of information on their nation. However, a similar study by Adelusi (2008) using students of Obafemi University, Ile Ife as population, found that the students claimed to perceive their country with a “sense of pride” in view of her film exploits. There was, however, no evidence that negative contents portrayed in the films have had any significant impact on their assessment of their country and fellow citizens. The study by Nwosu (2008) tends to align with the findings by Adelusi (2008) as it similarly discovered that negative and stereotypic portrayal of women in Nollywood films have not significantly affected the audience perception of women in the real world.

However, Okoye (1998) finds that “heavy viewing of foreign films and local films portraying foreign content” tend to alienate young audience from their environment by inducing in them preference for foreign culture and disdain for the local culture.

Bell and Dunn (1998), in their own study, found that the stereotypic portrayal of negro Americans in some Hollywood films have tended to reinforce racist mentality in the majority of the white students surveyed in selected high schools in Michigan. They thus conclude that “films can indeed influence perception by reinforcing existing biases and judgments.”

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

In summary, it is to be admitted that impact of films in perception formation is real and has been empirically established here and there. However, such impact cannot be rightly positioned without taking cognizance of the moderating roles of variables like individual differences, existing personal biases and stereotypes, among others.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated within the framework of the theory of selective processes which demonstrates how individuals may retain or change their opinions in the face of media messages based on three psychological processes of selective attention, selective perception and selective retention. This theory underscores the fact that Nollywood films could only impact positively on Nigeria’s image when their foreign audience members are favourable in their “selections” as regards exposure to the films, perception (interpretation) of their messages and retention of the same.

METHODOLOGY

This study is quantitative in approach. It would follow some definite guidelines and rigour to achieve its aims. The guidelines are discussed below under research design, population of study, sample size and sampling procedure, instrument of data collection and method of data analysis.

Research Design

The research design used in this study was survey. This was prompted by the nature of the study as well as the problems and the variables involved. Investigating these sort of variables would require data extracted from the

Nollywood foreign audience, and this would be most effectively done via surveying the members of this audience.

Population of Study

The population of this study were foreign audience of Nollywood films who attended the international conference tagged “Nollywood in Africa; Africa in Nollywood” organized by Pan-African University” between July 21 and 23, 2011.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The sample size for the study was 20. The 20 respondents were selected from among the film professionals and academics that attended the international conference referred to above. The selection followed accidental procedure wherein the researcher distributed his questionnaire based on chance meeting at the conference venue.

Instrument of Data Collection

The data collection instrument was questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised entirely of structured questions. The instrument was divided into two parts: the section one contained questions seeking the respondents’ demographic data while the second section had questions intended to supply data for answering the research questions.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

A total of 20 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and recovered at 100 percent rate. The 20 copies thus formed the basis for the analysis made hereunder.

Demographic variables

Table 1: Sex of Respondents

ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGES
Male	13	65%
Female	7	35%
TOTAL	20	100%

Table 1 shows that 65% of the respondents are males while 35% are females.

Table 2: Nationality

ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGES
USA	7	35%
Canada	3	15%
India	4	20%
South Africa	6	30%
TOTAL	20	100%

The above shows that 35% of the respondents are Americans; 15% are Canadians; 20% are Indians; while 30% are South Africans.

Table 3: Designation

ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGES
Practitioners	3	15%
Academics	17	85%
TOTAL	20	100%

Table 3 shows that while 15% of the respondents are practitioners, 85% are academics

Research Question One

To what extent have Nollywood films established their presence outside the shores of Nigeria?

Table 4: Respondents’ opinion on Nollywood’s popularity

ITEMS	YES	PERCENTAGES	NO	PERCENTAGES
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Do you watch Nollywood films?	7	35%	13	65%
If no, do you know of Nollywood films?	13	65%	-	-
Would you say Nigerian films are generally popular?	20	100%	0	0%

Table 4 shows that while 35% claimed to watch Nollywood films, 65% claimed not to. The table also shows that all of these 65% (who claimed no to watch), however, admitted to know about the films. It is also observable from the last column of the table that all of the respondents (100%) view Nigerian films as generally popular.

Based on the foregoing analysis, we answer the first research question by stating that Nollywood films, have to some good extent, established their presence outside the shores of Nigeria.

Research Question Two

How positively or negatively do foreign audience perceive Nollywood Films?

Table 5: Respondents' opinion on Quality of Nollywood Films

ITEMS	POSITIVE	PERCENTAGES	NEGATIVE	PERCENTAGES
How would you rate Nollywood films in terms of content?	15	75%	5	15%
How would you rate Nollywood films in terms of technical quality?	8	40%	12	60%
How would you rate Nollywood films in terms of circulation (reach)?	14	70%	6	30%

Table 5 shows that in terms of content, 75% of the respondents rated Nollywood films positive, while 15% rated it negative. In terms of technical quality, however, 40% rated it positive as against 60% that rated it negative. Then, in terms of circulation (reach), majority (70%) rated it positive, while 30% rated it negative. Based on the content and circulation ratings, we state, in answer to our second research question, that Nollywood films are positively perceived by foreign audience.

Research Question Three

How positively or negatively have Nollywood films influenced the perception of foreign audience about Nigeria?

Table 6: Influence of Nollywood Films on respondents' perception of Nigeria

ITEMS	YES	PERCENTAGES	NO	PERCENTAGES
Would you say Nollywood has earned Nigeria a name?	17	75%	3	15%
Would you say your respect for Nigeria has been positively influenced by Nollywood?	12	60%	8	40%
12. If no, would you say it has negatively influenced it?	0	0%	8	40%

Table 6 shows that majority of the respondents (75%) claimed Nollywood films have earned Nigeria a name as against 15% that did not hold such opinion. Similarly, 60% claimed Nollywood has positively influenced their respect for Nigeria, while for 40%, it is not so. However, all of these 40% still claimed Nollywood has not negatively influenced their respect for Nigeria either.

Based on these data, we answer our third research question by stating that Nollywood films have positively influenced the perception of foreign audience about Nigeria.

Research Question Four

What improvement(s) does the Nollywood require to enhance its image laundering potential for Nigeria?

Table 7: Respondents’ opinion on how to improve Nollywood Films;a better image for Nigeria

ITEMS	YES	PERCENTAGES	NO	PERCENTAGES
Do you think Nollywood films require some improvement to make greater impact on Nigeria’s image?	20	100%	0	0%

Table 7 indicates that all of the respondents were of the view that Nollywood films require some improvement to make greater impact on Nigeria’s image.

Table 8: Respondents’ opinion on the areas of Nollywood Films requiring improvement towards a better image for Nigeria

ITEMS	YES	PERCENTAGES	NO	PERCENTAGES
Content	17	85%	3	15%
Technical quality	20	100%	0	0%
Directing	16	80%	4	20%
Artistes’ performance	5	25%	15	75%

Table 8 shows that apart from the area of artistes’ performance (5%), most of the respondents’ adjudged other aspects of Nollywood films as requiring improvement towards a better image for Nigeria as follows: content (85%); technical quality (100%); and directing (80%).

Based on the foregoing, we answer the fourth research questions by stating that to enhance their image laundering potential for Nigeria, Nollywood films require some improvement on content, technical quality and directing.

Summary and Conclusion

This study investigated how much Nollywood has served as a cultural diplomacy tool for Nigeria. It found that Nollywood films have to a good extent established their presence outside the shores of Nigeria; that foreign audience perceive Nollywood films positively; that Nollywood films have positively influenced the perception of foreign audience about Nigeria; and that to enhance their image laundering potential for Nigeria, Nollywood films require some improvement on content, technical quality and directing.

In conclusion, the data generated from this study obviously reinforce the popular notion that films can serve as a potent tool for cultural diplomacy that would reward a nation with good image and influence in the global scene. This has definitely benefitted countries like the United States and Indian (Okoye, 1998; Uche, 2009; Ndukwu, 2010). The call for Nigeria to embrace the same therefore begins to sound strongly reasonable, logical and compelling.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research and other observations made by the researcher, the following recommendations are found necessary:

- Nigeria must begin to see her cultural elements, particularly films as not just means for mere leisure or money making, but also as a powerful tool towards attaining and sustaining positive image. By so doing, the nation would have been set on the path to true and efficient public diplomacy that impact on her quest for international good image and power. “Cultural elements including Television Programs, Film, Music, Radio, Sports, Cuisine, and Religion among many others play an important role in shaping how countries are perceived abroad. These activities can have a

significant impact on international relations through cross-cultural communications (“Cultural Diplomacy”, 2011).

- Government should feel involved in this effort by intervening with a viable policy and legal framework as well as other institutional backings that would make this goal a reality.
- Scholars and researchers must also feel involved by approaching their task of studying Nollywood also from the perspective of its cultural diplomacy potentials. “Agencies like the Nigerian film cooperation should be mandated to research and design procedures to pursue an articulated cultural diplomacy regime through our films and to ensure successful intervention in the area of pervasive cultural intrusion into our society” (Ndukwu, 2010).

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